



BUILDING AN ECONOMY EVERYONE OWNS

Will the next generation inherit a sense of belonging or alienation? The answer lies in the democratic and economic choices we make today. The conditions favourable to an inclusive local economy are within our collective power to create. How we use that power to benefit everyone is what matters most now.

Some afternoons, after I pick up my three-year-old from his daycare in Toronto's Chinatown, we walk to buy a steamed bun for dinner before heading home.

Along the way, he notices things I might otherwise miss. The excavator digging up the sidewalk. The streetcar ringing its bell. The ducks hanging in the butcher's window. Sometimes he'll wave enthusiastically at the food delivery drivers waiting for their next order at Dundas and Spadina, and they'll wave back.

As we walk, I find myself noticing things too. Down the street, shopping carts hold places in line outside the food bank. A personal support worker steps off the streetcar after a long day. A security guard heads in the opposite direction to pick up an extra shift. An Etsy seller carries parcels to the post office. Newcomers driving rideshare weave through traffic. Every second counts.

My son doesn't think to ask why some people seem to be rushing while others are waiting. He doesn't know that [food bank use has doubled since 2019](#), or that there is [nowhere in Ontario](#) where someone working minimum wage can afford to live on that wage alone. He doesn't know that [nearly one in five workers](#) earns low pay.

What he knows is that this is his city. "My streetcar," he says, at the stop outside his daycare. "My dim sum palace," he says, pointing to Rol San restaurant, where we go some Sundays with his grandparents. "My doggy," pointing at a dog that is definitely not his dog.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT OUR CITY

At work, I've been talking lately with people who have noticed worrisome changes in the cities they've claimed as their own. These conversations have led me to think about the instinctive sense of belonging that thrives or stagnates in certain conditions. For many people living and working in a prosperous place like Toronto, these conditions are inexplicably hostile. In this city of ours, more people are working harder than ever, yet fewer are connected to or share in its wealth. Income inequality has reached [the highest level ever recorded](#) by Statistics Canada, and only [one in five of us believe](#) that life will be better for the next generation.

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People all around, headphones in, eyes on their phones. Swipe: a get-ready-with-me video featuring a sponsored makeup concealer. Swipe: a food truck vendor livestreaming his workday, viewers sending tips with roses and coins. Swipe. A mom-fluencer reminding viewers to like, comment, and follow. Beneath the endless scroll is a new economy of workers. While comparable Canadian estimates are scarce, Goldman Sachs estimates that roughly [7% of the American workforce](#) is trying to make a living in full-time content creation.

That means millions of people are banking on going viral and the hope of [earning more in a month](#) than their parents made in a year. More than years at the only retail job that

finally called them back, after weeks of sending out résumé after résumé into one of the toughest youth labour markets in over a decade. More than the profession they're studying for, that [artificial intelligence may transform](#) before they even graduate. Most won't hit the jackpot, spending instead countless hours producing labour that employment standards were never designed to recognize or protect.

It's little wonder, then, that a pessimism hangs in the air, heavy with the summer humidity and smoke from wildfires hundreds of kilometers away. Two thirds of Canadians feel a [significant sense of grievance towards institutions](#). Four in ten say they would accept at least one form of hostile activism to bring about change—from attacking people online to spreading disinformation, damaging property, or even threatening violence. Among young people aged 18 to 34, that figure rises to nearly two-thirds.

I don't know what it feels like to carry that kind of grievance. But I do know something about what scarcity can do to your sense of belonging. Growing up in Toronto in a newcomer family on eye-wateringly low incomes, we moved around the city, renting rooms in other people's houses.

One year, my parents brought a birthday cake to school, along with loot bags filled with dollar store trinkets for the class. There's a picture of me in a frilly dress, standing with my classmates in front of the cake. We're mid-song, pumping our arms in optimistic unison: *"Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, Zip-a-Dee-Ay! My oh my, what a wonderful day!"* When I look at this picture, even now, decades later, the first thing I remember is the guilt that wracked me for months afterwards, lying awake at night tallying up what it had cost, or that we had spent our few extra dollars that month giving gifts to kids that didn't even like me.

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When you're trying to get by in a place that feels like nothing belongs to you, hoarding can become the natural order of things. Scarcity has a way of shrinking your horizons from 'What can we share with each other?' to 'Will there be enough for me?'

EXPERIENCING ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY WHERE WE LIVE

When conversations turn to the crisis of democracy, they often focus on its civic rituals. We worry about declining voter turnout and civic literacy, as though a Grade 10 civics education might persuade the democratically disengaged that democracy is working in their favour if only they would participate in elections and community meetings.

For many of us, where we experience democracy and its absence most viscerally is in who has power in the economy. The personal support worker has little say over the scheduling practices that determine whether she can see her children before bedtime. The rideshare driver doesn't control the algorithm deciding which fares appear on his phone. The grocery clerk watches the long-term care home where his mother lives change hands to a private equity firm, with no voice in decisions about the care she receives.

Who decides how work is organized? Who owns the daycare centre, or the platform through which people earn a living? Who benefits from the wealth our labour creates?

These are the kinds of questions [Atkinson](#) and [Social Capital Partners](#) set out to explore in a room of forty-plus civic leaders from across Canada during the Democracy XChange Summit in April. The conversation coalesced around the idea that a democratic local economy is one in which the people and places creating economic value also have the opportunity to own it, shape it, and benefit from it.

A democratic local economy closes the distance between where value is created and where its benefits accrue. It recognizes that the people whose work and care generate prosperity should also have the opportunity to share in it. That is what makes an economy both more inclusive (expanding who participates) and more equitable (broadening who benefits). It is what many of us describe as "community wealth building"

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"Community wealth building is one of the best alternatives to the economic model we have, one built on extractive capital, concentrated ownership, and the false promise of trickle-down gains. That model is failing to address the crises we face because it ignores the most basic questions: who owns the economy, who benefits from it, and who has economic power," says Social Capital Partner's Matthew Mendelsohn, a co-host of the roundtable with Atkinson's Colette Murphy.

Community wealth building centres these questions, Matthew says. "It's about economic sovereignty, with communities holding real ownership and decision-making power over their assets and capital, and about economic democracy, where the people who generate wealth have a meaningful say in how it's used."

In practice, this means organizing across different sectors to broaden ownership through co-operatives, employee- and locally-owned businesses, and community land trusts. It involves employers and employees coming together to make workplaces more democratic through stronger labour standards, collective bargaining, and fair wages. It means elected and other community representatives collaborating with public officials and private developers to ensure public dollars create public value through social procurement and community benefits agreements. It's also about investors and their advisors keeping their capital accountable to place through community finance and mission-driven lending. Further, community wealth building treats land and housing as foundations for home rather than vehicles for speculation.

The leaders and organizers we gathered are already using these tools and several others to build more democratic and inclusive local economies. Our [report was written to build on the conversation and capture a few of their stories](#). For example, we heard that Taproot Community Support Services [became the first employee-owned organization](#) in Canada's social services sector last year, the type of sale made possible by hard-won provisions around [employee ownership trusts in the Income Tax Act](#). Overnight, 750 community and social service workers became collective owners of their workplace through an employee ownership trust. When the decision was announced, one of the workers, a relatively new Canadian, was overheard saying, "Wow, this is the first thing in Canada I'm going to own."

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CHOOSING COMMUNITY WEALTH

As a parent, there's a lot to worry about when it comes to the future for workers. I've joked with friends that, instead of enrolling my son in Kumon, I should channel my inner Tiger Mom into opening a preschool workforce development program called *Lil' Chakras*, where toddlers learn to open their third eye. "Forget math, clairvoyance may be one of the only skills artificial intelligence can't automate!"

The truth is, though, that perhaps more than focusing on figuring out what kinds of jobs will be around for our children, we should be spending our time and ambition asking how to shape the economy they will inherit.

Too often, our response to economic change begins and ends with the individual. We ask how workers can become more resilient, more entrepreneurial. We invest in skills training and encourage side hustles. Worthy goals diluted by the faulty premise that the burden of adjustment rests primarily with people in isolation, rather than also with the systems that predetermine how they work. [As we say in the report](#), “how the economy works is a product of human choices and design. Just as the current model stems from public policy choices both big and small, these can be undone and the economy can be re-made to work for more people and communities.”

The day before the roundtable, I learned the Gaelic word *dùthchas* from Neil McInroy of the Democracy Collaborative, [one of the architects](#) of Scotland’s ground-breaking Community Wealth Building legislation. He had [travelled to Toronto](#) for the DemocracyXChange roundtable, and to meet with community organizers, elected representatives, and public officials, who themselves had collaborated to introduce the City of Toronto’s [landmark Inclusive Economic Development Framework](#).

Dùthchas has no easy English equivalent. It is about feeling rooted in a place and responsible to it in a relationship of reciprocity; about understanding that a community is more than a collection of individuals living side by side. It is about feeling grounded and at *home* — belonging to a place and to each other.

My child understands *dùthchas* implicitly. “My streetcar.” “My dim sum palace.” “My neighbour.” “My doggy.” That is the inheritance I owe to him.

It is also the inheritance we owe to each other, kin and strangers alike. If we’re serious about renewing our democracy, we’ll make community wealth a driver of our local economy. An economy built with every tool at our disposal and at the very biggest scale of our ambition. And one that makes it possible for many more of us to say, with the certainty of a three-year-old, “my city.”

This essay is one in an occasional series published by the Atkinson Foundation to amplify the diverse voices that make up movements for decent work and a fair economy.



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